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Statement submitted by Marie Stopes International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Marie Stopes International (MSI) is a global organisation providing woman-centred contraception, safe abortion, and post-abortion care services to women and girls in 37 countries. The high-quality services we provide empower women to choose if, and when, they have children. At the end of 2017 26.9 million women and men were using a method of contraception provided by us.

We would like to thank the Commission on the Status of Women for this opportunity to discuss the contributions of social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure towards gender equality and sustainable development. Given our mission this submission is focussing on current gaps in public services, in terms of sexual and reproductive healthcare, which are currently hampering progress towards gender equality.

The potential of social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure

The role of social protection systems, public services, and sustainable infrastructure in reducing poverty is clear, and has been noted in variety of global policy frameworks — including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

To ensure these systems empower women and girls, they must be designed in a gender-responsive manner and consider the underlying causes of inequality and exclusion of women and girls. Designing social protection systems, public services and infrastructure with women and girls at their centre is crucial to their sustainability and effectiveness.

A key underlying cause to women and girl's continued inequality is their exclusion from, or limited access to, woman-specific essential healthcare services. In particular, access to comprehensive contraception and safe abortion care. Until all women have access to these services, gender equality will be unachievable.

Access to comprehensive abortion care through public healthcare services: a key prerequisite to gender equality

Globally approximately 13 per cent of maternal mortality is attributable to unsafe abortion, with 23,000 preventable deaths each year, and 7 million more women experiencing complications. It is widely recognised that legal restrictions do not reduce the number of women seeking abortion, but merely increase the number of unsafe abortions. Globally 56 million abortions take place each year, with 25 million of these unsafe. Significantly more unsafe procedures occur in countries with more restrictive abortion laws.

It is therefore crucial that States recognise access to abortion as both an essential part of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and a prerequisite for gender equality. If we are to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, we cannot ignore the evidence that points towards the benefits of safe and legal comprehensive abortion services, and women and girls must be able to make decisions about their own bodies. As such, Marie Stopes International calls on States to reduce restrictions on access to safe and legal comprehensive abortion care services, and to ensure their availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality through public health services.

States must recognise that medical abortion has revolutionised access and that health systems and regulation must keep pace with its increased availability, ensuring quality of care and keeping decision making in women's hands. Choice must be protected, with some women preferring medical abortion because it enables privacy, autonomy and a greater sense of control, but some women choosing or needing surgical abortion.

We further call on states to recognise women's agency and autonomy and provide full and unrestricted access to woman-controlled methods of abortion including medical abortion. Where legal, regulatory, social or economic restrictions exist, States must make every effort to remove them and ensure universal access. Comprehensive abortion care services, including medical abortion, should be integrated into public health systems and universal health coverage schemes. Where Governments are unable to provide these services within the public health system, it should work with the private sector to ensure the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of comprehensive abortion care services.

Conclusion

Gender equality cannot be achieved without gender-responsive social protection systems, public services, and social infrastructure investments. A key underlying cause to women and girls' inequality is inadequate access to comprehensive contraception and abortion care services, among other woman-specific health needs. In order to remove this barrier to gender equality, Marie Stopes International calls on States to:

- Reduce restrictions on access to safe and legal comprehensive abortion care services.
- Ensure the availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of comprehensive abortion care services, including access to woman-controlled methods such as medical abortion. This should be done primarily through the public health system, but States should work with the private sector to fill gaps in availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality.
- Include comprehensive abortion care services under universal health coverage schemes.